

**Statement of  
Leslie A. Violette, Treasurer  
Belle View Condominium  
Unit Owners Association**

**On the Subject of Washington, D.C., Regional Preparedness and Response In Case  
of Emergencies**

**Before the House Committee on Government Reform.**

**October 3, 2004.**

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Leslie Violette. I am the Treasurer and former president of the Belle View Condominium Unit Owners Association. This Association is comprised of owners of the 903 condominium units within the Belle View Condominium and is responsible for the management and maintenance of the common areas of the Condominium. Belle View Condominium is located in the Fort Hunt area of Fairfax County and lies along the George Washington Parkway adjacent to the Potomac River and Dyke's Marsh.

During the early hours of Friday, September 19th, Hurricane Isabel created a storm surge that pushed a 9 ½ foot wall of water over the banks of the Potomac River and into the Belle View Condominium, flooding homes, damaging utilities and destroying property. All sixty-five buildings within the Condominium were flooded. Seventeen homes remain uninhabitable; family heirlooms and mementos have been destroyed; and, many residents remain today without hot water, heat, gas or electricity. Preliminary estimates of the damage to the Belle View Condominium common elements alone range between four and six million dollars. The losses suffered by Belle View families cannot yet even be estimated.

Fairfax County officials issued warnings of this calamity only nine hours before the surge occurred, although County engineers knew as early as the preceding Wednesday night that the storm surge would flood the Belle View area. In fact, many Belle View residents learned of the approaching surge only when Fairfax County firemen knocked on their doors beginning at 7:00 p.m. on the night of the storm, leaving them with precious little time to move vehicles to higher ground or to remove personal property from basement storage areas and below grade residences.

Fairfax County officials have described Belle View as "the most vulnerable point in the County" and County engineers knew days before that a storm surge was likely and as early as the preceding Wednesday that it was likely that Belle View would be flooded. However, the County waited until the night before the storm to hastily announce a meeting of members of the boards of directors of area residential associations, including Belle View. The County official conducting the meeting reported that he had already been briefing communities for approximately one week before the arrival of Isabel. In

answer to questions, the official said that the community could expect that the side streets, main roads and intersections within the community would likely be covered with six inches of water, making them impassable for a time. He also anticipated a three to five foot tidal surge; not the 9-½ feet Isabel delivered. During this briefing, the County was uncertain whether evacuation would be necessary and offered no direction on what residents should do in the event of an evacuation order or where we should go if we were evacuated.

Those forty people attending this meeting and the many thousands of Belle View residents who were not notified of the meeting were given no further information by the County until television stations began broadcasting the mandatory evacuation order and firemen began appearing at their door.

On the Friday and Saturday following the storm, using the Mount Vernon Recreation Center, the County worked to bring together and coordinate resources to assist us in recovering from the calamity that had befallen us. Several meetings were held for the Belle View community over these two days but there were continuing problems in coordinating the meetings and notify residents and the Association of the meetings. Since these first two days, County officials, specifically Supervisor Gerry Hyland, Mount Vernon Police Captain Larry Moser and Fairfax County Fire Department Battalion Chief John Caussin have been tireless in assisting our residents, in coordinating relief efforts and in communicating with the Association and our owners. In addition, Congressman Moran responded to our needs quickly and vigorously, bringing federal emergency relief resources, such as FEMA and the SBA, to bear. Likewise, the American Red Cross responded immediately to our human needs and was a godsend to our dispossessed residents.

Our region can and should prepare and respond to future area emergencies more effectively. In our particular case, if the area of the County in which Belle View is situated is the “most vulnerable part of the county,” we need to develop means to better protect this portion of the county. We need to develop better means for prompt, early dissemination of information and warnings about approaching dangers. With more warning than we received here, valuables could have been preserved, vehicles could have moved to safety and special needs residents could have been cared for better.

Long range planning for emergencies is everyone’s business. The Belle View Board of Directors has already begun steps to understand what can be done to better protect our physical plant. We believe a coalition of local governments, businesses and residents should be developed to work towards improving our systems for identifying, grading and warning of potential dangers and to respond to the dangers as they occur. Only now, after the damage has been done, are all the necessary parties talking with each other and cooperating with each other. I wish this had happened before and as the storm approached and I hope the developing dialogue will continue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members for the opportunity to address you and to report to you what we have experienced.